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TAGS: PREL PGOV PARMS MNUC KS RS

SUBJECT: RUSSIA-SOUTH KOREA RELATIONS: NO FRICTION, BUT  
THE NORTH TO WORRY ABOUT

Classified By: Political M/C Alice G. Wells. Reasons 1.4 (B/D).

¶1. (C) Summary. GOR officials characterized the August 30-31 Moscow visit by the South Korean Foreign Minister Song Min-Soon as "excellent" with no notable problem areas requiring serious negotiation, except the shared concern for North Korea's nuclear programs. FM Lavrov summarized the Russia-South Korea relationship as one that is "on the rise in every sphere in an intensive, regular and trusting partnership." The denuclearization of the North dominated the foreign ministers' meeting, while economic issues remained key questions on the bilateral front. End summary.

Six-Party Momentum

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¶2. (C) At an August 31 press conference following the meeting with FM Song, FM Lavrov emphasized the partnership between the two countries, which are bound by regional security interests and mutual trade/investment. Presidents Putin and Roh Moo-Hyun met on September 9 on the margins of the Sydney APEC Summit. MFA Korea Desk Senior Counselor Oleg Davydov underlined that Song's visit, although hastily arranged as a short stop on his way back from the Middle East, was important for both countries, as the Six-Party Talks are at a momentous turning point. According to the MFA and the Korean Embassy, the two foreign ministers agreed to help create an environment through the Six-Party process for eventual U.S.-DPRK diplomatic normalization.

¶3. (C) Korean Embassy Political Counselor Kim Chang-Gyu stressed that preparations for the Beijing Plenary could begin only after all Working Groups (WG) met. The last WG--Japan-DPRK bilat meeting--ended on September 6. South Korea, which had backed the U.S. push for a September Six-Party Ministerial, had reluctantly accepted Russia's insistence on a later meeting. With China's objection to a Russian proposal to hold the Ministerial at UNGA in September, the two agreed on an October gathering of Six-Party foreign ministers in Beijing. FM Song solicited the GOR's help with South Korea's proposal for confidence building measures, which South Korea circulated for the August 20-21 Russia-chaired WG on the North East Asia Peace and Security Mechanism and failed to garner support.

Bilateral Cooperation: Economics First

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¶4. (C) FM Lavrov welcomed the release of the Korean hostages from Afghanistan and supported the South-North October 2-3 Summit. In turn, FM Song secured Lavrov's support for South Korea hosting the 2014 EXPO in YoSo. However, Kim affirmed that economic cooperation was the main bilateral issue. The two ministers discussed ways to introduce leading Korean firms to the Russian economy and joint energy and space projects, with the particular South Korean interest in

Sochi-Olympic related infrastructure projects. FM Lavrov also announced that the two governments were making efforts to bring North Korea to "trilateral" projects such as connecting the Trans-Korea with Trans-Siberian railways. (Note: The project has been under consideration since 2000 but we have seen little progress. End note) The South Korean government was seeking to involve Korean companies in the modernization of the North Korean side of the railway.

¶5. (C) A gas pipeline from Russia through North Korea to South Korea is a distant but real possibility, the ministers agreed. The joint space program comprises two projects: training of a Korean cosmonaut in the Gagarin Center, which will put the first Korean in orbit later this year, and Korean import of a small size satellite launching system.

Comment

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¶6. (C) While Russia's relationships both with China and Japan are complicated, Russia-South Korea relations seem to be paranoia-free. For most Russians, Korea does not loom as a future strategic threat as the other two may. How the GOR and ROK manage North Korea will further shape the relationship.

Burns